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ABSTRACT

This paper examines social anonymity of Native American girls in high school, highlighting the importance of social context and discussing the issue from the perspective of Native American females. A national view of Native American women has portrayed nonexistent persons. The Euro-American view accepts males as intrinsically, universally dominant and females as subordinate. The Native American perspective of the Native woman is missing from fiction and nonfiction. Native peoples regard women as neither inferior nor superior to men. A proactivist view of Native American womanists as culturally intact heroines can replace negative definitions of Native American women existing in literature. Often, a deficit model is used to explain the overall failure of Native American high school students, negatively comparing tribal culture with a positive view of the mainstream. Native American females' high school achievements are often ignored by mainstream teachers and administrators, and teacher racism is an ongoing problem. High school teachers must learn a viewpoint beyond an American mainstream definition. Much educational policy regarding Native American students is based on published examples of failed teaching. Educational policy must be based on positive descriptions rather than the opposite of failure. The positive description of Native American women must become part of the theoretical foundation of educational policy and instruction to establish positive learning models for application in schools as a conscious learning experience in the classroom. (Contains 65 references.) (SM)

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Invisibility of Identity in the Social Context

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Invisibility of Identity in the Social Context

Karen Roberts Strong

Introduction

A closer look at the trials of high school as a personal experience shows an invisible observer non-participant of American middle class social life in high school. As a result, I was unremembered, unwelcome, and unhonored for my academic and athletic high school achievements at graduation. My witness of the social context in high school has not been heard publicly before.

The universalist overlay of dominant opinion and practice over my high school educational experience caused me to question the morality of some instructional practice. My personal response was to withdraw from dominant educational practice. As a child and a teenager, I projected an invisible personality. As a college student, I aggressively protested the dominant nature of this practice. As a teacher, I practiced this dominant behavior until I felt comfortable in my classroom. I realize now, that this comfort level is responsible for many teachers maintaining the premise of dominance in the classroom. My own fear caused me to hinder my personal reasoning regarding dominance issues. Many times, I hid my research findings and refinements from myself, both physically and mentally. The patience I had learned to project toward my students became a real problem, projecting into my research efforts. Slowly, these internal barriers were resolved, and I bolstered my action research findings with newfound bravado.

National Definitions of Native American Women

A national view of Native American women has defined a nonexistent person. Medicine (1975, 86), Jaimes and Halsey (1992,320), and Almeida (1997, 758) quote

existing literature which has called Native women drudges. This long-established Euro-American view accepts males as intrinsically and universally dominant and females as intrinsically and universally subordinate. The Native American perspective of the Native woman is missing from both fiction and non-fiction. Native peoples regarded women as neither inferior nor superior to men (Bowker 1993,36). Both sexes were valued for the contributions they made to their society, and their roles were regarded as complementary rather than competitive.

Paula Gunn Allen (1989) alludes to Native American women as being the mothers of a vanishing race. Allen quotes fiction writers like Wadsworth and Hawthorne, who romanticized the vanishing Indian. While R.H. Pearce (1965) documented that American writers often utilized Native Americans as the perfect opposite example of what it means to be American. Thus, a national American identity was established by offering a published example of what not to be, over and over.

M. Meyer (1997) describes Native women as invisible or silent voices. A closer look at the trials of high school as a personal experience shows myself being an invisible observer, non-participant of the social life. I was one of five young teenage girls who stood behind two teenage girls who had public personalities and spoke for the rest of us. As a result, I was a nonentity whose academic and athletic high school achievements were ignored at graduation. Others walked on stage first to be recognized. I sat with the remainder of the graduating class, receiving my diploma alphabetically. My recognition as a member of the girls basketball team who won the 1964 Nevada state championship and one who placed second in state (Alaska 1962) as a hundred yard dash runner went unnoticed. Nor was I recognized for placing first in the state for the Spanish Teachers of America (Nevada 1964) award.

Almeida (1997,757) has coined the term "hidden half." This definition is a more traditional tribally specific example of the Native American woman within historical

accounts. For example, when the European explorers came into Alaskan waters to establish trade agreements, Tlingit tribal chiefs offered slave women to the explorers. These traditional heads of clans told the explorers these women were their wives. As a matter of fact, the explorers never saw the chief's wives. These women were hidden every time the explorers approached the village sites (Neilson 1956 oral tradition). These negative definitions of Native American women, young and old, are being challenged.

A Positive Definition of Native American Women

A pro-activist view of Native American womanists as culturally intact heroines can replace these negative definitions of the Native American woman existing in the literature. The dictionary definition of pro-action is in favor of action. In this context, pro-activist means a plan in which a positive outcome is expected. Also in this context, culturally intact Native American women means those women living protected lives within the cultural norms and traditions of the native community. In explanation and as a definition of a complex term, the feminist doctrine advocating social and political rights for women has been tempered in this paper by the selective choice of the term womanist, meaning that a mature, positive approach to this doctrine will propose a steadfast practical application for lifelong use by those Native American women active in community service. Culturally intact heroines are Native American women who are mature, protected ladies willing to serve the Native American community,

> "even when the body aches with fatigue. Even when there is nothing left to give, there is an open door, an open heart."
>
> (Johnson 1994,5)

Within a traditional perspective of Native American women, Ardy Bowker states,

> from the native perspective, women were regarded as neither inferior, nor superior to men.
> (1993 *Sisters in the Blood*, 36)

These definitions can become more complex descriptions when a Native American voice is heard.

The Deficit Model of Native American Education

The Kennedy Report (U.S. Govt.,1969) portrayed many brutal racial conflicts happening to Native American students during their failed high school experience. A deficit model has been used to explain the overall failure (Zintz 1960, Szasz 1974), negatively comparing tribal culture with a positive view of the mainstream. Serious communication problems have existed between Native Americans and the schools they attend. The communication problems have been well-documented since Sullivan's 1845 article in the New York *Morning News* (Triplett 1883, Jackson 1886,The Merriam Report 1928, Armstrong 1945, Kluckhohn & Leighton 1962, Woodward 1963, Wax 1971, Vogel 1972, Szasz 1977, Fuchs & Havighurst 1983, Oppelt, 1984, Prucha 1985, Salisbury 1986, U.S. Census 1980 & 1990). The existing literature is filled with descriptions of the problems.These problems are summed up by Jon Rheyner in his statement,

> "To begin with, being an American Indian in itself is no problem; however, being an American Indian and growing up and going to school in a non-Indian environment and society frequently is a problem."
> (1988, ix)

High School Failure: Whose Perception Caused This?

As my personal experience, I witnessed young Native American womens' high school achievements ignored by teachers and administrators. In fact, a young Native

American woman may be damaged by this selective amnesic practice. Through my literature search, I found five psycho-socio factors create education barriers specific to literacy. Bowker's (1993) five factors are:

1. poverty, not culture as the primary major barrier,
2. adolescent pregnancy,
3. lack of expectation toward Native American males,
4. persistent teacher racism,
5. child abuse in the form of neglect, physical abuse, & sexual abuse.

I found in the literature, others were able to document the existence of this damaged educational experience whether this experience was caused by Native Americans or non-Native Americans (Dow, 1986; Hollan, 1990; Locke, 1992; Power, 1994; Sarris, 1993). Intact educational experiences have also been documented by scholarly research (Hay, 1977; Krell, 1993, 1985, 1948; Larson, 1930; Mohawk, 1993; Scheper-Hughes, 1987; Scollon, 1972, 1979, 1989; Shweder, 1991; Smandych, 1995; Spiro-Melford, 1993; Time-Life, 1989). Specific failed high school educational experience for many young Native American women has been documented by Jon Rheyner (1988, 1992), Janet Silman (1994), Jane Katz (1995). Ardy Bowker's (1993) study focused on a positive outcome. Her study of 991 Plains Native American women offered significant findings concerning their literacy. Her book, *Sisters in the Blood* (1993) documents educational systems based on rejection, alienation, and oppression. Yet within that system she saw individual strength and commitment of Native American women and their families. Allowing the women to speak for themselves, their stories paint a clear picture of the factors that create barriers to school success.

For example, poverty is one major contributor to the failure to continue in school. Unfortunately, all too often the educational system has treated poverty and culture as synonymous. More critical for the success of Native American women is the

strong influence of both teacher encouragement and a school climate that offers all students a positive reinforcement. Persistent teacher racism is documented. These few factors are only primary reasons within a complex system including lesser variants which are integrated into a negative fabric blanketing the literacy opportunities of Native American women.

Bowker's research also highlights cultural discontinuity as one of the factors causing drop-out, causing adolescent pregnancy and a lack of expectation toward Native American males, and child abuse in the form of neglect, physical abuse, and sexual abuse.

Five primary barriers to Native American women's literacy within Bowker's study are an articulate set of oral narrative findings from the broader twenty-seven factors causing barriers to young Native American women's education found in Bowker's inquiry study. These are not the experts reporting what they see or hear. Bowker's scholarly, intentionally deliberate interview questions approach and question individual women living on or near reservations in order to address a problem long glossed over by policy analysts, both conservative and liberal. Through persistence, maturity, and the continued family and community support, Native American women have managed to reverse their negative teenage experience.

Victoria Wyatt (1993) argues that oral narratives of Native women are necessary because sc little exists in the literature, in their own voices. This research adds to the paucity of published works. Other published scholarly works (Almeida, 1997; Medicine, 1975), includes excerpts from narratives of Native women. Casey (1995) claims that life histories offer a political voice which may change definitions and meanings (239-40).

A Mainstream Educational Definition of Young Native American Women

When American society applies universalist intent upon Native American high school age women, then an overlay of dominant opinion and practice project an element of control over a high school classroom. By excluding student opinion and decision-making, a teacher often faces a silent, unresponsive group of students. As the teacher's instructional practice fails, the teacher may wonder why such profound ideas are not accepted. This teacher is at the end of a long line of researchers looking for answers.

Since the seventeenth century the perspective of the Euro-American conqueror and his missionary allies have questioned the "problem peoples" (Vidich/Lyman 1994: 30). Volumes of publications of

> "... their work recognizes both the historicity of preliterate cultures and the problems attendant upon understanding the world of the other from the other's point of view."
>
> (31)

The answers to the questions posited have the perspective of the dominant opinion. These questions need to begin to include the perspective of the oppressed. Then answers may describe a positive concept. Imagine a positive outcome from a vignette of questions. So, why can't a teacher pick and choose good ideas and present them in a classroom?

A Hypothetical High School Teacher's Redefined Perspective

As a teacher, do you need to be reassured every day of your good teaching practice? Can you accept criticism? Second, don't you think that a lesson or curricula may be perceived to be as a bizarre cut and paste entity, visually and mentally disparate to the students? Can you ask students why they do not respond to

a lesson? Thirdly, is it possible that students may possess a good opinion or reason worth listening to? Can you be flexible enough as a teacher to admit to your mistakes and accept student advice in order to rethink a mismatched lesson?

A postcolonial perspective for high school teachers can be introduced. By postcolonial, I mean a viewpoint beyond an American mainstream definition. For example, Freire (1996) expects student in-put in his teaching. Goody (1977) describes how restricted codes applied in the classroom setting results in a colonized abstract thought process. Ong (1995) compares the literate and oral processes to literacy. Gee (1996) describes the dominant and the inclusive language teaching processes. And, Bakhtin (1981) presents a historical overview of how memory has been affected by writing public discourse into epic and novel genre. These theories have been practiced as an inclusive action within the teacher-student relationship. This inclusiveness appeals to my altruistic and moral values of my parents, including the sense of history and community they taught me.

My Personal Perception of Myself

My place within human history has been of keen interest to me. The following are a sample of comments offered to me. My father told me always to remember what I say effects years of history around and beyond my lifetime. My undergraduate mentor, Sven Liljeblad was 108 years old when he told me that 500 years from now, I will be remembered for my children's plays, not for my scholarly findings. Academic thought may march over, around, and past my theories.

As a psycho-linguist, I have researched how Native American people became literate through operant cultural discourse. Rather than continue to address the Deficit Model describing the failure to teach Native Americans to read, I have described a

positive process and the individual choices possible within this framework which I have observed and implemented as a language teacher through action research. These theories need to be replicated by others. My qualitative research reinvents self in a positive light. Michelle Fine (1994) claims that positive descriptions of self ruptures the texts with uppity voices (73) and probes the consciousness of the dominant others (78). The positive description does not address the differences, but identifies similarities to the dominant others. Thus, my theories may become part of instructional practice.

I recognize myself as a whisperer from a collective of activist researchers (Fine 1994, 81), who are willing to posit theories on behalf of social justice. Societal response and further refinement of positive theories can effect the learning process and environment of future students. The choices which society, educators, and administrators make can change the original intent expressed within a theory.

As a Native American woman, I know my place in human history. As a scholar, I realize I will have to face my worst fears with academia. When my proposed theory develops into instructional practice, my scholarly efforts will be to direct proactively this practice into an inclusive format with solid connections to specific cultural tradition. For I consider the comparmentalization of cognitive thought outside of a cultural context the fundamental crisis within educational theory and practice of the twentieth century. We, as research educators, need to proactively reconnect cognitive thought processes to a singular tradition. Once cognitive thought is embedded into one tradition, a multiple thought process can develop into a new paradigm for learning. In other words, we Native Americans and others who have been oppressed need to heal and regain our intact cultural thought process. By learning a postcolonial experience, we can reach the next level of human experience.

This time, let us (Native Americans) talk. Disregard your language shock

response for the moment. Save it for your turn. Continue to listen. You may hear a provocative thought paradigm.

Projection for the Future

Much educational policy regarding Native American students has been based upon published examples of failed teaching (Rheyner, 1988) has proposed an opposite action to these negative experiences, suggesting teachers learn the culture, language, and learning styles of Native Americans. Earlier published lists of comparative behaviors of the teacher's culture and the Native American students' culture (Zintz, 1969) may be simplistic stereotypes. Failed instructional guessing and stereotyping has yet to create a successful program for Native Americans. Educational policy needs to be based upon positive description rather that the proposed opposite of failure.

This positive description of Native American women needs to become part of the theoretical foundation of educational policy and instruction in order to establish positive learning models to be applied in schools as a conscious learning experience in the classroom. Another form of research needs to be published. Action research may offer more positive examples for teaching Native American children and adults. This form of classroom research may be slow and tedious, but more practical for success. More qualitative inquiry studies with a focus upon describing successful teaching practice, successful Native American student experiences, including Native American student voice and perspective can propose a positive educational experience for future high school teaching of young Native Americans.

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